

All viewpoints deserve place at cabinet table

By CHRISTOPHER MAJKA
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Kudos to the NDP government for having expanded its cabinet. From the start, it was — and it continues to be — understaffed. Keeping a cabinet threadbare in the interests of austerity represents a false economy.

One saves on ministerial salaries, but if ministers have too many weighty portfolios and are spread too thin, it simply means they cannot be on top of all the issues that require their attention. Thus, important matters are left undone or get shifted to unelected bureaucrats.

It certainly is the case that the NDP has a very deep talent pool in its caucus, a great feather in the cap of the party. It's also true that the progressive wing of the NDP is poorly represented in cabinet, this despite the large number of talented individuals who have much to offer this province, foremost among whom is Howard Epstein. There's probably no one in Nova Scotia who has such a comprehensive grasp of environmental issues.

It's simply absurd not to be taking advantage of these abilities, particularly given the fact that both Fisheries and Environment — two enormous portfolios, each one of which is more than a full-time responsibility — are currently being fielded by one minister, Sterling Belliveau.

The government also took the very progressive step of creating a new Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage — effectively a "culture" department in the broad sense of this word — bringing responsibilities for culture, heritage, archives, libraries, Acadian, Gaelic and African Nova Scotia affairs all under one departmental roof. This is something the cultural community has been advocating for decades.

Moreover, the NDP has two sitting members who are professional artists: Pam Birdsall from Lunenburg, a master ceramist with deep roots in the province's arts and crafts communities; and Lenore Zann, an accomplished and internationally recognized actor. This may be the first time in history that professional artists have been members of the provincial government's caucus.

Despite this, the government appointed Dave Wilson, for eight years a paramedic before entering politics, and someone with no background in the sphere of culture, as minister for this department. I've no doubt that Wilson will do his level best in the portfolio, but any rational analysis of caucus strengths and abilities would have put Birdsall or Zann at the helm of this new department.

Darrell Dexter has called himself a conservative progressive; his cabinet, however, increasingly represents the former at the expense of the latter.

It's no secret that the NDP includes people of a multiplicity of viewpoints, which is absolutely natural, expected, and a great strength of the NDP as it broadens its political tent. All perspectives deserve a place at the cabinet table if the government seriously wants to galvanize the talents, abilities and energies of the broadest spectrum of Nova Scotians. Christopher Majka lives in Halifax.